When the Air is Thick

The first memory I have of Guam was the last time I was here. But today the sun is out. And whenever I step outside my glasses fog up. It's thick out here. I must have been eight or nine when we all came here as a family that Christmas. Back when my parents were still married. When we lived in Columbia. The humidity in South Carolina managed to always reach one hundred percent in summertime. My dad has said more times than I can count that it was the hottest fucking place he had ever been.

"And I was in the fuckin desert for months!" Referring to the time he spent deployed in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

"Ain't shit hotter than this shit right here." My dad has always been one to either exaggerate or downplay, one extreme or the other.

My parents, brother and sister, John and Alexis, and I landed at the airport in Guam a week before Christmas. It was two in the morning when an uncle, who I could not for the life of me remember, and my tata came with two cars to collect us. I had always had asthma, but this particular air made me feel as though I was choking. I can't remember exactly what kind of tropical storm had wreaked its havoc on our far away home, only that it left it devastated. The debris of so many lives now scattered about in the dirt roads, houses caved in from swells left to ruin, no running water, just the overflow of rain and wave. When we got out of the car at my uncle's house, I remember rubbing at my eyes, thinking *this can't be how people live.* My tata brought jugs of water from his trunk to the kitchen table.
"This is for bathing and brushing your teeth. If you're thirsty there are Yoo-hoos over there." He pointed to yellow pouches containing a sweet brown liquid that mom never let me drink.

When we woke up in the morning, I spilled more than my share of water trying to scrub at my feet and felt ashamed for not being more careful. I thought about all of the people who didn't have grandpas to buy them jugs of water or Yoo-hoo. And less than twenty-four hours after landing in Guam we headed to Saipan, a forty-five-minute plane ride. I couldn't help but think about the waves. How like our quick pit-stop in Guam, we'd come and gone, landing and retreating to safer lands.

Today, when I talk to Auntie Bobbie about remembering the aftermath of the storm all those years ago, she talks about the bodies. How the rage of the water had uprooted graves. How families had no way of knowing who belonged to them. Brothers and sisters and nanas and tatas left to wander the island in whatever form they had taken in the ground.

"It was disturbing." She said.

But this was something they were all used to. A destruction they anticipated year after year. Our Mariana Islands just a dot on the map of the Pacific.

I tried to think about a body washing up at my door. If there was a way to know if the storm had disturbed their peace in any way other than the location of their final rest. I thought about how when you're dead you don't really belong to anything physical. How eventually you're just limbs or dust, moving around wherever the earth decides to take you next.

At the airport on my way to Saipan, I look at my phone, checking Facebook to remember what my family looks like. The last time I was here we were children. My Auntie Agnes and Uncle Frank had been in Guam for a few days to see the doctor, so are on the same flight from Guam to Saipan. They sit two rows behind me and I wait in my seat anxiously wondering how they remember me.

My cousin Taylor and her boyfriend, whose name I can't remember, come with two cars to collect us. "Danielle!" She says with the biggest smile. "It's been too long! Welcome home!"

We head to their family compound where they all live in adjacent houses. Unfinished construction projects hidden under tarps to mask the damage from the last storm.

On my second night on the island, we meet up with her brother Jason and his wife and daughter at one of their favorite Chamorro restaurants.

"We're going to order everything for you, cuz!" He gleams.

After too much food is brought to our table and we've stuffed our faces past the point of what some people would consider *normal*, it begins to rain and Jason tells me about Yutu.
"We didn't have power for months. We boiled our water." He looked around at everyone watching him retell this event.

"We kept just hoping that someone would help us. But we knew better."

And I think again about the bodies. Just like Auntie Bobbie had said in Guam. The families huddled inside their boarded homes, guessing how long it would take this time for the storm to pass over their island. I thought about this island. Five by six miles of history I have yet to learn. Bodies. Water and people fighting and losing again and again.

I was living in D.C. when Super Typhoon Yutu hit in 2018. It was November. My mom had called to tell me about the trouble our family was in. She told me to pray for them. Instead I looked up news articles.

CNN: *Yutu is the strongest storm on record to hit the remote island communities of Saipan and Tinian, the largest of the Mariana Islands, home to about 55,000 people. It's also one of the strongest storms to ever hit a US territory, and one of the strongest tropical cyclones on the planet this year.*

I thought about the heat. How even in a month like November the air would be thick. The winds providing backlash instead of comfort. I thought about the debris. The pieces of peoples' livelihoods being swept away with their prayers. I hoped they would get relief soon.

And now, when sitting and remembering it all, I think about my cousin retelling Yutu's terror. His calmness. How he didn't even consider the alternative.

"We knew better than to wait for help."

And it was a feeling I knew all to well. A colored body trapped in the thick air of America, waiting for promised relief.